

Last week we read from John's Gospel (Ch. 10) where Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. Just like last week's image, this week's image- the vine- is another extended metaphor, which also borrows from Old Testament imagery for Israel. Today's text comes after the Last Supper, where Jesus gathered with his disciples around the table, and he blessed and broke bread with them and washed their feet and gave them a new commandment to love one another- just as he loved them (13:34); a commandment that is repeated and amplified in today's text. Jesus gives his final words for three whole chapters to the disciples as he prepares to leave them (14-16). This morning we find in these final words Jesus' last "I am" statement out of 7- each "I am" is an image familiar to Jesus' followers and points to relationships with God, the Father, with Jesus, and with each other. Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in the Gospel of John, chapter 15 various verses listed in your bulletin (vv. 1-5; 11-13, 16 & 17). **READ.**

One of my favorite writers is Anne Lamott. I like her because she's honest, funny and crass at times about her faith but most of all I like her because she loves to follow Jesus and she does it knowing of her own desperate need of God's grace and forgiveness. She writes, "My understanding of the kingdom of heaven, both as it is inside my heart, as Jesus said, and in the bigger world, is that it's a come-as-you-are party and that you are welcome to come to the table- people who are hungry and thirsty and needing rest. I understand that I'm welcome, and I'm accepted exactly the way I am. It's like that dumb bumper sticker that says, 'You are loved exactly the way that you are by God, but God loves you too much to let you stay like this.'"

In John's Gospel, John reiterates Jesus' desire to be in relationship with us as we're given an image of Jesus being the vine and God being the vineyard keeper. However, the Old Testament image is that of God as the vineyard keeper and Israel as the vineyard or grapevine. God tended Israel and pruned her and prepared her so that she might bear fruit. But here Jesus changed the metaphor. Here Jesus says that he is the vine, God is the vineyard keeper and Jesus' disciples are the branches. As the sheep follow and are cared for by the Good Shepherd, so too the branches cling to and are nourished by the vine. However, in various seasons, the branches are pruned in order to produce more fruit. As an amateur gardener, I've learned that if I prune the roses at a certain time, they produce more blooms. The same with us. But have you ever tried to grow something that was from just a branch? A branch like this. Maybe we could tape this orange to this branch. No, it just doesn't work. A branch doesn't grow fruit without being attached to the vine- to the source. That single branch can do nothing apart the vine. Neither can we produce fruit if we are cut off from a relationship with Jesus. Apparently, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine, where the nutrients are most concentrated. **What is the fruit we are meant to produce?** Well, the first thing that comes to mind is the fruit of the Spirit- "joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). But there's really only one task for us to do: remain- to hang in there for the long haul. For example, we cannot produce joy without being in relationship with Jesus. "Remain in me, and I will remain in you," Jesus says (v. 4). In other words, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you" (*The Message*). Unlike branches on a real vine, we can choose to remain in Christ or not. If we

choose to do so, we will have to coexist with our fellow branches and that can get messy, crowded, tangled, and oh-so-beautiful. A life that's deeply rooted and wildly fertile. **But how do we remain connected to Christ?** One way is by inviting the Holy Spirit to remain in us or pausing and offering a prayer before we eat or at any time, recognizing that Christ is always with us. Or trusting Jesus' strength and not relying on our own or being intentional about surrounding ourselves in a community of faith or by reading and studying Scripture by ourselves and with others or by seeking justice or by remembering or baptism or by breaking bread together at Christ's table and/or by serving those in need in Jesus' name. There's a famous prayer of St. Patrick which invites Christ to remain close by.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in the eye that sees me, Christ in the ear that hears me.

The last two lines...let them sink in for a minute. Christ in the eye that sees me, Christ in the ear that hears me. When I was leading one time at a conference, a small group leader was upset about something I had said and told me so. A wise mentor of mine had invited me years before to try and see the face of Christ in every person I met. "Our job is to be who we say we are and who God says we are- carriers of the divine image. When you see Christ in others you will see and live differently" (Richard Rohr, E-votion 4.27.21). While difficult, this invitation has often allowed me to offer compassion instead of becoming angry and defensive- to listen and to dwell in Christ therefore loving the other person. As

God's word tells us, abiding in Jesus means abiding in Jesus' love. While it is true that apart from Christ we can do nothing, the opposite is also true. In Christ, through Christ, and with Christ, we can do all things, not because of us but because of Jesus Christ (Rodger Nishioka, *Connections*).

Jesus tells his disciples about his connection with them so that his joy would be in them...in us and our joy would be complete. When we experience Christ's joy in us, it is contagious. It's difficult to hold a grudge around pure joy. Bearing fruit when it counts grows from union with Jesus. But keep in mind that branches don't live off their own fruit. The fruit is for someone else. Have you seen the joy of God in others?! They just can't seem to contain themselves. There was a video circulating on social media a few years ago of a 6 year-old named Loren Patterson from First Baptist Church in Dickson, TN. She is one example of someone filled with Christ's joy and is sharing her joy with the world. This video of her rejoicing through song and dance went viral and within a few weeks, it had over 5 million views. The Today show featured her and quoted, "This girl is bringing joy to people in a gloomy world. There ain't nothing gonna steal her joy!" That's the name of the song these kids are singing, and Loren is believable because she is full of joy. Nothing's gonna steal her joy because Loren's joy is from the Vine. I'll be sure to put the video link on our FB page so you can watch it. Loren is bearing fruit, and she doesn't even know it. That's a good thing because it's not for her- it's for those of us who need to see it in her- to be reminded of the fruit that comes when one finds their home in Jesus Christ. And a child shall lead them...

Notice that the key to remaining in Jesus is obeying his commandments. It's what he requires of his disciples. So, then, what are the commandments? There are many but they all seem to boil down to one thing: Love. While producing fruit can mean the general Christian lifestyle, it points here specifically to the act of loving one another as Christ loves us. Jesus said, "No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends" (15:13). **The resurrection- when Christ laid down his life for his friends- is the greatest act of love.** For God so loved the world... Will Willimon, a Methodist Bishop originally from Greenville, stated that *The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds community that there is no explanation other than something decisive that happened in history.* Another scholar (Clarence Jordan) said, *The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb but the full hearts of his transformed disciples...the crying evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit filled fellowship...not a rolled away stone but a carried-away, love-filled church.*

Love is the essential fruit of our faith. It's not the kind of love expressed when you say, "Wow, I love this fried chicken!" Or the love in a romantic movie. Or the love expressed in a card. No. This kind of love is agape love, and it does not come from us; "it is the love shared between us because it is only possible through the indwelling of God's Spirit. You can't actually muster it up yourself. Because on our own we love imperfectly. We love awkwardly and with selfish motives and begrudging hearts. Our own love can be showoffy or miserly or only given when we feel like it. But the love of

God for the children of God is no such thing. And God desires God's children to love one another too much for God to leave it to what is on our own hearts. See, agape love is how we love Jesus' friends. It's how we show care and hospitality toward others based solely on their belovedness to God. All whom Jesus loves and call friends have dignity and honor and should be treated as such. I think Jesus says for us to abide in his love so that we can agape love one another. It's the only way its possible. Otherwise I will love the people I like and I'll reject others love of me when I don't feel worthy and that's just not what God had in mind for me or for you" (Nadia Bolz-Weber, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/05/330/>). And only when we see ourselves **and** others as Jesus' friends- as God's beloved children- is it possible to love with the heart of God. When we abide in the Word of God, when we see Christ in the eye that sees us, this kind of love is not a feeling, but more a way of acting. This agape love is our daily mission. Jesus reminds his disciples and us that we didn't choose him; he chose us. And as disciples, we're called to take our leading and our sustenance from Christ. But being chosen doesn't mean we're free to act however we want to act. In response to being chosen by God and God's grace, we're called to obedience...to discipleship...to relationship with Jesus and our neighbors, sharing God's love. This is no small or easy task because the world is not yet what God desires, and temptations and isms still abound.

How are you connected to the Vine? What fruit are you producing in this world? The only fruit worth sharing with this world is the fruit we produce together. However, we produce fruit not by squeezing it out of ourselves but because we are extensions of the vine, pruned by the vineyard keeper. Let us find our home in God's word and place our trust there- therefore producing lasting

fruit and loving one another as Christ loves us! It's all that easy and it's all that hard. But with Christ, nothing is impossible. Love wins! Thanks be to God! Amen.